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ABSTRACT

Two major gaps have long existed in family studies: first, the gap between theory and research, and second, the gap between scientific research and its application to practice and policy issues. While the four issues of theory, research, practice, and policy-making are often dealt with separately, the four must become closely integrated if real progress in any of them is to be achieved. Recently published data on patterns of interaction with kin after divorce show that interaction with one's own kin remains the same or increases after divorce, but that interaction with the former spouse's kin greatly decreases or even ceases entirely. Indications are that although sociologists have often conceptualized kin networks as supraindividual, they appear to be highly contingent upon the participation or lack thereof of key individual family members. These findings support a central thesis of this paper: sociologists in particular need to take more cognizance of the role of the individual in family behavior. Such empirical data is also relevant to the pragmatic concerns of practitioners and policy-makers whose decisions have a direct impact upon the nature of family life in the United States. (Author)

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY, RESEARCH, PRACTICE
AND POLICY-MAKING: THE CASE OF INTERACTION
WITH KIN AFTER DIVORCE*

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Abstract

Two major gaps have long existed in family studies: (1) the gap between theory and research, and (2) the gap between scientific research and its application to practice and policy issues. While the four issues of theory, research, practice, and policy-making are often dealt with separately in our everyday activities, it is argued that the four must become closely integrated if real progress in any one of them is to be achieved. Using recently published data on patterns of interaction with kin after divorce, it is demonstrated that such empirical data is relevant to both the theory-building efforts of sociologists and to the pragmatic concerns of practitioners and policy-makers whose decisions have a direct impact upon the nature of family life in the United States.

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During the past few decades of family studies, advances in empirical research have far outstripped the development of theory (Burr, 1973).

This has led to the familiar complaint that social scientists have accumulated a considerable amount of information on the family, but that this information is often "meaningless" because it has not been integrated into any overall organizing theoretical framework (Aldous, 1970). More recently, another complaint has been voiced: Sprenkle (1976) has called attention to the fact that, for various reasons, much existing social science research on the family remains relatively useless to family practitioners and to those who formulate laws and policies affecting the family.

There seem to exist, then, significant gaps within the field of family studies (broadly defined). It is our contention that these gaps separating theory, research, practice, and policy-making stem at least in part from a lack of attention to the peculiar parameters of American society. More specifically, theorists, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers have paid unequal attention to the manner in which the values and institutional structures of a liberal democracy call for a recognition of the contrast between "individualistic" and "collectivistic" elements in conceptualizing American family life. This contention will be illustrated through an investigation of the nature of extended kinship ties among middle class Americans and of what happens when these ties are disrupted by divorce. First, however, it is necessary to briefly examine certain features of American life which have a direct bearing upon theory-building, research, practice, and policy-making with respect to the American family.

The Individual and the Collectivity in a Liberal Democratic Society

In family studies, perhaps more so than in most other substantive areas of sociology, we are frequently reminded of the universality of certain societal institutions. Thus, despite the many variations found across different societies, the fact remains that some equivalent of the family appears to be something of a social universal (Murdock, 1949).¹ Moreover, we can also note with some degree of certitude that unless certain "functional prerequisites" are accomplished by societal institutions, persons in that society are going to suffer serious costs which they will define negatively (Bennett and Tumin, 1948). An example which comes to mind is the social control function normally associated with the family or with some equivalent of it. Timasheff (1960) observed some years ago that the Soviet leadership reversed its attempt to abolish the nuclear family as a bourgeois institution largely because it came to see that without the informal control functions performed by the family Soviet society became subject to a great deal of social disorganization, including the rise of mobs of unruly youths and even more exploitation of women (sexually, economically, and politically) than had occurred in pre-revolutionary days. Thus, to put it in the language of contemporary sociology, Soviet leaders came to recognize the functions of the family and, even though they were ideologically predisposed to weaken that institution, saw practical utility in maintaining it. They had to reassess their conceptualization of the family and its functions and, in so doing, concluded that their original conceptualization was in error.

Are we, in the United States, Canada, and other Western industrial democratic societies, likewise making errors in our view of what family

is and what it does? How, exactly, have we conceptualized the family in such societies?

Solving the problem of conceptualizing the family in American society can be accelerated by searching for analogies with the ways in which conceptualizations of other issues have been handled in other substantive areas of social science (Aldous, 1970). For example, Jerome Skolnick (1975) has pointed out that it is impossible to adequately conceptualize the problem of criminal justice in a theoretical sense without having in mind what the normatively defined goals of police work are within a specific society. Thus, while all human societies face the universal problem of maintaining social order, "liberal democratic" or "free" societies such as Great Britain, Canada, or the United States face an additional problem of maintaining order while at the same time protecting individual rights. In a totalitarian society the problem of order can be conceptualized more easily since law is seen as subordinate to order (as defined by the ruling elite), whereas in a free society the theoretical issues become more complicated because of inherent tensions and frequent contradictions between competing demands for social order and for individual rights.

For our purposes the essential point in Skolnick's study of the police is that if we are to adequately conceptualize the problem of order in a free society we must build into our theoretical model a clear conceptualization of the peculiar properties of this type of society as they bear upon the problem under investigation. Thus, Skolnick conceptualizes the problem of police work in American society as a problem in operationalizing solutions to the conflicting demands resulting from the public's desire

for order and the legal system's adherence to principles that protect the rights of individuals.

Moreover, as Skolnick's study illustrates, it is impossible to completely separate the tasks of theory-building and policy-making. Conceptualization of both tasks must necessarily go hand in hand or we are apt to experience a good deal of frustration. If we are operating within a totalitarian society we may formulate policies which offer the most efficient means for achieving a single, unequivocal objective. If, however, we are working within a liberal democratic society, it is essential to formulate policy alternatives with recognition of the fact that maximally efficient means for achieving one objective may run counter to the realization of other, equally important objectives.

Our point is that any effective theorizing, research, practice, or policy-making pertaining to the American family must start with a recognition of the fact that the nature of the family as an institution will be strongly influenced by particular characteristics of American society and that judgments as to what constitutes acceptable intervention in the family will be similarly affected. Here the analogy with the criminal justice dilemma becomes clear. Just as in the problem of maintaining social order, we find that the processes by which certain universal family functions are dealt with in American society are influenced to a large extent by the value placed upon the individualistic orientation. In turn, this value may frequently prohibit policy decisions which maximize the efficiency of attempts to achieve certain goals, such as the maintenance of family stability, because such policies may violate other equally valued goals, such as maximizing individual rights and individual development.

Sociology and the Rest of the World: A Clash of Perspectives?

The argument presented above is basically that theory-building, research, practice, and policy-making must achieve a certain harmony² in terms of perspectives if they are to bridge the gaps which currently separate them. Further, the perspectives of the various disciplines must harmonize with the world view reflected in the values of the society in which the disciplines find themselves.

At this juncture, however, we face a serious problem insofar as the sociological view of family life seems to run counter to, and frequently to contradict, the individualistic orientation which we have noted to be such an important part of the political and institutional fabric of American society. Sociology has largely emphasized the degree to which individuals are not as "free" as popular culture would suggest and that in fact individual behavior is very much influenced by structural forces which are frequently beyond individual control. Analytical concepts commonly used by sociologists, such as status, role, socialization, norms, etc., channel sociological thought into a more deterministic model than is typically accepted by the non-social scientist. This phenomenon could be a major factor explaining why many family practitioners and policy-makers have often found sociological studies of little help in their endeavors.

Certainly we do not wish to discredit the insights into family life that have been achieved through use of the sociological perspective. We do want to call attention to the serious problem that arises if in the process of demonstrating how individual experiences, including those of family life, are structured by external forces, sociologists neglect to take adequate account of the individualistic premise. The difficulty,

quite simply, is that in so doing, sociologists may eliminate from their analytic world view precisely that which is the most distinctive property of the society within which they are doing their research and theorizing. This idea is by no means a new one: Dennis Wrong (1961) called our attention to the problem many years ago. The point is sufficiently important, however, to bear reiteration--particularly since movement toward solving the "clash of perspectives" problem has been less than rapid over the past few decades.

Like any other problem, the "clash of perspectives" issue must be approached from more than one direction if a solution is to materialize. While the sociological view of human behavior may have overemphasized the deterministic model, those working in the helping and legal professions may also suffer from certain shortcomings which the world views of their disciplines have imposed upon them. It seems safe to say that each of us, no matter what his or her training, experiences a certain amount of what Thorstein Veblen called "trained incapacity." The perspectives of our respective disciplines help us to focus intently upon certain limited aspects of human behavior, while simultaneously blinding us to other perhaps equally important aspects. The end result is all too often that we find ourselves in a position similar to that of the fabled three blind men attempting to describe an elephant.

The solution to this clash of perspectives calls for greater sensitivity on the part of sociologists to ways in which the individualistic premise can be integrated into conventional sociological perspectives on the family. Practitioners and others ordinarily working from a more individualistic orientation must become more sensitive to cultural influences

affecting individual families and individual family members. In the remainder of this paper we will attempt to illustrate why such increased sensitivity makes sense theoretically and empirically in terms of how individuals and families relate to one another in the United States. We will also attempt to indicate how increased sensitivity to the individualistic-deterministic problem can lead to more effective treatment of families and to more effective family policy decisions.

A Case in Point: Views of the "Isolated Nuclear Family" and the Extended Kin System

The relationship between the nuclear family and its extended kin network has long been a topic of interest for students of the Western family. The "classical" sociologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggested that as a result of industrialization and urbanization, drastic changes would occur in many traditional institutions--including the family. In fact, the family in particular drew the attention of many of these early writers, for they feared that the family's loss of functions might result in widespread anomie and social disorganization (for example, see Zimmerman, 1947). The assumption underlying such writing seems to have been that the family--a social group--provided a secure emotional support system without which the individual's functioning in society would become highly problematic. In addition, the extended kin network was conceptualized as an essential element in the maintenance of individual and societal stability. Such assumptions and conceptualizations perhaps resulted from early sociologists' reactions to the individualistic intellectual atmosphere of the nineteenth century.

A new conceptualization of the family developed after the turn of the century. This conceptualization received its most complete statement

in the work of Talcott Parsons (1942, 1955), who described the "isolated nuclear family." In Parsons' view the modern isolated nuclear family was becoming a highly specialized unit which concentrated its efforts upon socialization and meeting the socio-emotional needs of individual family members. It served as a haven of warmth in the midst of an impersonal gesellschaft-like society. In this conceptualization, the individual moves to center stage while the family unit becomes primarily a back-up or support system for individual striving.

Since the publication of Parsons' views a number of researchers have found empirical evidence which illustrates that for at least some American families Parsons may have over-emphasized the isolated nature of the American nuclear family. The reader is referred to Leslie (1976) for a succinct review of this literature. In addition, recently renewed interest among sociologists in the topics of the local neighborhood, the community, and ethnicity (Laumann, 1966) has directed research to the question of the extent to which the individual in American society is affected by intimate social ties.

The research referred to above makes important qualifications to Parsons' conceptualization of the individual in society, and yet it frequently remains little more than a source of academic debates largely, in our view, because neither body of theorizing or research has succeeded in integrating its claims into a larger view of the place of the family within American society. The critical question left unanswered, by and large, is "Why do we find variations in the degree to which kin networks support or fail to support nuclear families?"

Answers to this question have tended to focus upon variables that are correlated with kin support of nuclear families, but which cannot be considered

as causal explanations of why some kin networks persist and/or develop while others do not. What remains to be explained are the processual mechanisms which actually tell us what happens, in a sequential pattern, to either encourage or discourage kin support of the nuclear family. As Sprenkle (1976) points out, this is the sort of information which is not only of scholarly interest: it is also central to the decision-making of policy makers and practitioners in the family field.

This brings us again to the initial point of departure of this paper, which is the difficulty encountered in dealing with the peculiar processes involved in interpreting family-related behavior patterns unless we have some grasp of the unique features of the society which can help give "structure" to these patterns. Much of the literature on kin networks and their aid to the nuclear family has implicitly adopted the view that an active extended kin network is something of a legacy or holdover from the past, whereas the isolated nuclear family is a manifestation of more recent societal trends. While this assumption may contain some degree of truth, it still does not tell us what sorts of mechanisms were employed to maintain kinship ties and kinship support of nuclear families in the past, nor why such patterns of support have either remained the same or changed for different families.

A more profitable alternative, in our view, is to focus on the "individualistic" premise itself as a source of explanation for both historical and contemporary trends with respect to kinship support of nuclear families. A careful examination of the building and maintenance of kin networks in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, for example, illustrates that the existence of such networks was highly dependent upon the payoffs which individuals perceived themselves as

receiving from them. Perhaps the best illustrations in this regard are to be found in the histories of various immigrant enclaves in our large cities which have come to be labeled "Little Italies," "Greektowns," and so forth. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, these tight-knit interlocking relationships among kinsmen and fellow ethnics depended very much upon the existence of payoff structures in which individuals found it worthwhile to identify with their respective groups. Such payoffs included opportunities for mutual aid, social services, emotional support, and opportunities to learn strategies for survival in a strange land. The critical point, as the historical literature documents, is that the processes by which these enclaves became organized, cohesive communities often dependent upon the ability of political entrepreneurs (e.g., clergymen, politicians, etc.) to create incentive structures which induced individuals to support their respective ethnic communities.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration of the need to analyze family and kin relations in the United States from an "individualistic" point of view is the observation of what happens when individuals depart from kin networks. This is most striking with respect to divorce and subsequent interaction with kin. Several researchers in recent years have noted that interaction with consanguinal kin remains the same or slightly increases following divorce, but that interaction with the former spouse's kin greatly decreases or even ceases entirely (Spicer and Hampe, 1975; Anspach, 1976). What these empirical relationships indicate is that although sociologists have often conceptualized kin networks as supra-individual, they appear to be highly contingent upon the participation of lack thereof of key individual family members.

What Divorce Can Tell Us About the Nature of the Kin Network

In short, if we look at the situation historically we find that individual self-interest, rather than being a principle opposed to kinship and community, has been very much a critical factor in maintaining these types of relationships. This is not to say that the individualistic premise would be very helpful in understanding kinship or family relationships in other societies, but it does appear to offer valuable insight in understanding such relationships in the United States and other individually oriented societies.

As Nye (1974) and others have argued, many family-related roles seem to be changing from "obligatory" to "voluntary." The fact that in American society individuals, including members of families and potential kinship networks, have some choices--at least to the extent of not being forced as adults to maintain ties--means that if such ties exist there must be some kind of inducement structure in operation. Presumably this inducement structure can include elements ranging from positive inducements to negative sanctions. In addition, such inducements must be understood relative to inducements (positive or negative) that are operative in other institutional sectors of the society. Some understanding of the nature of these inducements can be gained by reviewing the work of Litwak (1959-60), who has argued that the "modified extended family" may offer the individual valuable assistance in locating jobs and moving up the occupational ladder, and Sussman (1959), who has found various types of "help patterns" existing between spouses and their parents. More work needs to be carried out along these lines to determine the exact nature of aid flowing between kinsmen, the conditions under which such aid is offered and accepted, and through which individuals in the kin network the aid travels.

With respect to this last point we can see that by beginning our analysis with the individual cost-benefit perspective we are led to consider the manner in which other institutional sectors compete with, open up, or close off opportunities for kin, family, or other communal networks to provide incentives which might attract individuals to stay in, identify with, and/or contribute to the kin network. This means, therefore, that we must also consider the bearing of political decision-making upon such incentive structures. To what extent, for example, does government provide "public services" which compete with those offered by kin networks? To what extent does government, through legislation or the courts, legitimize the provision of certain kinds of services through kin networks? Clearly, such questions are quite complex and we do not pretend to have answers for them. We do believe that significant progress toward such answers can be made by conceptualizing the family and kin network as settings within which persons act on the basis of individualistic cost-benefit premises.

Conclusion

Available studies of intergenerational help patterns show that parents offer various types of aid to their married children. This aid seems most often to have been conceptualized as aid from an established family to a new family. The conclusion that has been drawn has been that intergenerational ties between families persist even in advanced modern societies. Yet studies of spouses' interaction with kin following divorce show that help patterns continue between parents and their adult child and offspring, but not to the former spouse of the adult child. The implication which may be drawn is that intergenerational ties link individuals rather than families.

If continuity of family ties across generations was truly the issue, grandparents would be expected to continue to interact with their grandchildren even after the grandchildren's parents had divorced, for the United States follows a bilateral descent system which makes grandchildren equally a part of the lineage of both sets of grandparents. While interaction with consanguinal kin appears to continue or to increase following divorce, important variations occur in rates of interaction with former affines. Anspach (1976:327), for example, found that while 69.6 percent of his sample of divorced women did not interact with former affines, 30.4 percent did. Spicer and Hampe (1975:115) found that 27.9 percent of their sample saw affines as often or more often after divorce than they did before divorce. Thus far no convincing arguments have been put forth to explain why nearly 30 percent of divorcees maintain interaction with their former affines, while 70 percent do not. We suggest that this particular problem offers an excellent opportunity for students and practitioners interested in the family to test the utility of conceptualizing family and kinship in the United States as settings within which members function on an individualistic cost-benefit basis.

The problem of interaction with kin after divorce provides several avenues which theorists and researchers can profitably pursue. Can different rates of interaction with consanguines and former affines be explained in terms of individualistic cost-benefit factors? What factors does ego consider as costs or as benefits? What relative importance does ego attach to each? Do those who continue interaction with former affines perceive themselves and their children as receiving more benefits from such contacts than do those who cease to interact with former affines? What are the costs and benefits for the former affines themselves of continuing interaction?

Family counselors and policy-makers could gain valuable insights into the nature of family relationships if more was known about the factors which individuals weigh positively or negatively when deciding whether or not to maintain interaction with kin after divorce. Of particular interest to counselors would be more complete knowledge of the processes (rather than simply the outcomes) involved in post-divorce interaction with kin. It consistently has been found, for example, that interaction with consanguineal kin remains the same or increases following divorce, but little is known about possible changes in the nature or quality of such interaction. There are indications that post-divorce interaction with consanguineal kin may be significantly different from pre-divorce interaction. Weiss (1975), for instance, reports that some parents treat their divorced children as "failures," or expect them to revert to pre-marriage adolescent patterns of parent-child interaction. A woman who moves in with her parents following a divorce may find the parents carefully scrutinizing her male callers and scolding her if she stays out late. Is it possible that such interaction patterns are more common among divorcees who increase contact with former affines, who perhaps would be less inclined to treat their child's former spouse as a "child"? Such factors are quite likely to figure prominently in ego's cost-benefit calculations and may help to explain differential rates of post-divorce interaction with own and former spouse's kin. If there are clearly identifiable patterns in the ways in which interaction with kin may change following divorce, knowledge of these patterns would be of great value to family counselors.

Finally, we return once more to our central point. We have argued that current gaps between theory, research, practice, and policy relative

to the family can be explained in part by the fact that the different disciplines begin with different conceptualizations of the nature of the American family. We have proposed that sociologists in particular need to take more cognizance of the role of the individual in family behavior. Study of interaction with kin following divorce offers an eminent opportunity to test the utility of viewing the individual as acting on the basis of cost-benefit analyses even in intimate settings. At the same time, if such analysis reveals patterns of individual behavior, family practitioners will be reminded of the importance of supra-individual forces. When adherents of each discipline can begin to routinely understand and appreciate the underlying assumptions about the individual made by followers of the other disciplines, the bridging of the gap will have begun.

FOOTNOTES

1. This is not to say, of course, that there is no dispute about the existence or scope of "social universals." However, in our view the difficulties involved in this issue are far outdistanced by the difficulties in theoretically dealing with those features of social institutions which are peculiar to a given society.

2. By "harmony" we do not mean to argue that all disciplines should be in complete agreement on every point, but rather that they must be fully aware of each other's perspectives in order to understand how work in the various disciplines can most profitably contribute to each other.

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